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GREEK AND ITALIAN
DIALECTS

AS SPOKEN BY THE JEWS IN SOME PLACES
OF THE

BALKAN PENINSULA

AN ESSAY BY

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This essay was communicated to the Jewish Encyclopedia, in which, vol. vii., 310-313, it first appeared with a few alterations.

The island of Corfu, being a bridge which joins the Balkan Peninsula with Italy, may also be regarded as the rallying-point of Modern Greek and the Venetian and Apulian dialects as spoken and written by the Jews of those countries. The exclusive sway of the Greek language among the Corfiote Jews must have been of short duration, and lasted so long as the first stratum of the community which came from the so-called Romania remained homogeneous, *i.e.*, until their brethren from the Angevin possessions of southern Italy slowly but steadily joined them of their own will between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. A section of the community may, therefore, have used for teaching purposes the Greek translation of the Pentateuch printed in Constantinople in the year 1547, and the by thirty years younger translation of Job, which unfortunately has not been spared for the investigation of modern scholarship. Both publications, however, were made to meet the need of larger congregations of Greek Jews living in Constantinople, Salonica, Chalcis, Jannina, Arta, Zante, Crete, and other places where they have no representatives at present. From Candia, a town in the last-named island, comes also the modern Greek Jonah, manuscript copies of which are preserved in the Bodleian and the Bologna University Libraries. It was there that the Greek translation was solemnly read in the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement, and, despite all statements to the contrary, no record is extant of such a custom in Corfu. These translations are by their strict literalness of the Aquila type, and, although in places very ingenious, show in their authors a low standard of knowledge of Hebrew. The absolute absence of Turkish words and the betrayed ignorance of the Commentaries of the West schools lead to the belief that the Greek Pentateuch was written at least two centuries before publication, while for the Candia Jonah we must go

much farther back. The latter seems to be the earliest known monument in the modern vernacular, and offers, indeed, forms much nearer to the ancient than any remains of the advanced Byzantine literature. Keeping as they do very closely to the originals, these translations cannot be set up as models of Greek style and syntax, but they supply trustworthy material for scientific study in so far as phonology and morphology are concerned. Their reliability is greater than that of other documents, owing to the fact that the translators were not provided with any amount of non-Jewish learning and that they wrote in the Hebrew character the precise words and sounds of the every-day language, with no attempt at literary improvements.

That the Jews in Greece used to speak with no alteration the same language as their Christian fellow countrymen is proved by those compositions in which they could dispense with the blind submission due to Biblical texts, and either make free translations or write down their own thoughts. To the first class belongs a rhymed poem for Pentecost in lines of unequal length, each stanza of which was chanted after the original Hebrew it purported to translate. A few quatrains of this poem without the Hebrew used to be sung in the Corfu Greek synagogue (and others) as late as twenty years ago. There are also more or less free versions of some post-Biblical lamentations on the sad experiences of the nation, in all of which the genuine character of the Greek is noticeable; but the most important specimens in this branch of literature are two original dirges published with a great deal of incorrectness in *'Επετηρίς Παρνασσού*, 1902. The fifteen-syllable line of modern Greek poetry runs throughout, and the only internal evidence of their being Jewish lies in the subject dealt with. The Jews of the Greek-speaking places being few in number and their condition not generally bad, they had free in-

tercourse with the natives and used to draw copiously from the local stock of oral literature in all circumstances of life not affecting religion. The circular singing-dance, *χορός*, is still much in favour with the Jews of Corfu; and, curiously enough, the dirge of a mother giving vent to her sorrow for the loss of a son in a far-distant country was mistaken for specifically Jewish, owing to its having been found written in the Hebrew character and because two words, *רננים* and *חכמים*, were substituted for others in the original, signifying, perhaps, dignitaries of the Orthodox Church. This dirge was included in the published set, and is valuable for lines 26-29 (probably with a lacuna), which were wrongly inserted in the piece and evidently are part of a festival song lost to us. They run as follows:

Κ' ἢ γις πρέπει νὰ χαίρεται, πρέπει νὰ καμαρώνει
 Τὴν πασκαλιὰ καὶ τὸ Πουρίμ καὶ τὴ Μεγάλῃ Μέρα . . .
 Πρέπει νὰ τῇ [?] στολίσουμε καὶ τρεῖς φορές τὸ χρόνο,
 γιατί μοῦ συμμαζώνονται μικροὶ μου καὶ μεγάλοι.

There was in Corfu a song beginning

Ἦρταμε
 καὶ καλὰ σὰς βρήκαμε

to welcome the first day of Adar, which for this reason was called *ראש חדרש* de *ἦρταμε*, and a song for Purim is still in use at Jannina and Arta with a few Turkish words, showing that it was composed after 1669. The rules of metre, rhyme, and accent are without effort observed as strictly as in general literature. It consists of quatrains with eight syllables to the line, except the introductory stanza:

Κίνα γλῶσσα νὰ μιλεῖς,
 Θαμάσματα νὰ μολοεῖς,
 Κοιμημένους νὰ ξυπνεῖς,
 Μὲ κρασί νὰ τοῖς μεθεῖς.

In Or. 5472 of British Museum two stanzas near the end are each short of two lines, and *י* is ap-

parently resorted to as the most approximate rendering of the broken palatal sounds "ke" and "ki" of modern pronunciation, especially in the island of Crete, wherefrom this song seems to have originated. Here is the concluding quatrain, referring to Pharaoh's rush into the Red Sea:

Μπήκε νὰ μᾶς κννηγήσει,
 εἶπε νὰ μᾶς σιγυρίσει,
 τοῦκαμ' ὁ Θεὸς τὴν κρίση,
 οἶδὲ ἕνας νὰ μ' ντῆ γλύσει.

The Jews of Zante composed Greek verse to commemorate the civil equality extended to them by the French occupiers of the island after the fall of Venice. In their speech they sometimes use words derived from the Hebrew (תן = נתן, אבל, ען, etc.), but in a Greek form, whereas the same roots in Corfu are inflected according to the Venetian or the Apulian morphology.

The number is great in Corfu of families whose ancestors in their successive and long-drawn emigrations followed the itinerary from Spain to Portugal, Amsterdam, and Venice. The better class of the Community speaks the Venetian dialect with some modifications caused by the influence of the Greek, which was the only means of communication among the first Jewish settlers of the island. The latter language, while gradually disappearing as a living one before the newcomer, bequeathed to it a certain amount of its vocabulary and some of its syntactic peculiarities. The constant solution of the infinitive (*che digo* = νὰ 'πῶ, *che ti regna* = νὰ ῥθεῖς) is the most important phenomenon due to such influence, and mainly by it the Venetian of the Corfiote Jews differs from the same dialect as spoken by the non-Jews in the same town. A noteworthy feature of this dialect is the formation in *ò* of the plural of nouns ending in *à*, which originated from the imitation of the Hebrew תי simplified into

ò after the Italian laws of phonology (ברכות, *berakhò*; hence, *novità*, *novità*; *città*, *città*). There has presumably been no Jewish literature in this dialect, since Venice herself had very early adopted pure Italian as her official language, and all documents of the Corfu Jewish Community were written in that language, which served, too, as the means of translating the Bible in Hebrew schools.

The not numerous Jews who went direct from Spain to Corfu did not long speak their own language, which soon was effaced by the two predominant vernaculars of the place. The memory is kept in Arta of a Catalan, as well as of a Sicilian and a Calabrian, Synagogue, which obviously were all built by groups who migrated thither after a short stay in Corfu, but so short that the very names of such congregations are unknown to the Jews of the latter town. There was also in the Albanian seaport of Valona a ק"ק נירוש made up with refugees from Spain, but all these must have early removed from Albania and Epirus to Salonica, where they subsequently got Mahazors printed according to their own rites.

Corfu gave permanent residence to the Apulians, who brought from the Italian coast a few specimens, still preserved, of literature, and the vernacular which is now spoken there by the lower-class section of the Community. I read in an Adler MS. two love-songs, seeming to be original, of which one stands by itself and is of a rather scurrilous purport, while each stanza of the second is inserted after one of a religious Hebrew poem entirely differing in subject and meaning. They are written in the Hebrew character, as also is the semi-original composition containing the rules for the Passover Supper, from which I detach the following paragraph:

“Pigiàmu la מצה cu li doi signali, e la spartimu a menzu e dizzimu: Comu spartimu chista מצה, cussì ברוך הוא

spartiu lu Mari Ruviu, e passàra li padri nostri intra di issu e fuzzi cun issi נפלאות e נסים. Cussì eu fazza cu uul; chistu annu accà, l'annu che veni a la terra di ישראל omini liberi. Menza mintimu suttu la tovaggia pìr אפיקורן, e l'altra menza infra li doi, pìr eu fazzimu רמזים."

The Apulian dialect in supplanting the Greek of the original settlers took from it more material than its fellow conqueror, the Venetian, did. The borrowings extended to words expressing family connections. So they say *patri, matri, fratri* (pl. *fratàri*), *sorù*, *figgiu-a*, *niputi*, *maritu*, *muggeri*, *carussu-a*, but γαμπρò, νίφη, πεθερò, πεθερά, λεχώνα, κοιμπάρο-a, ανίπαντρο-η, and γάμ-u (wedding), plural γάμ-uvi; then, reverting again to the Apulian, *sì spussàra*, for "they married." Some vegetables and fruits are known only by their Greek names both to the Venetian and the Apulian-speaking sections: σέσκλο, σέλινο, κοκκινόχοιλι, χεμονικό, and many of the forms in the game of buckle-bones are called in Greek: κότσι, ενέση [?] μία, ενέση δύο, ενέση τρεις, ένας, δύο, τρεις, βοίρδαλο, χάσουλο; but *panza*, *buso*, and *Re*, for which last the Epirote Jews say κερδουλός, while they call its opposite χασουλός.

The single-worded past tense (*vitti, vidisti, vitti*) is the only one in use among the Apulian Jews, who agree in this with the Apulians of the Italian coast, whereas they differ from the latter in the formation of the future, which is a very complicated affair. Not only has it to start by the auxiliary *Anzu* (I have), as on the Continent, but the following infinitive is always solved after the modern-Greek fashion, which fact occurs often enough in the Apulian land (with the particles *mu* or *mi*), but is not constant as in Corfu, where, with the exception of the substantivized forms *lu manzari*, *lu mbiviri*, and some others, the infinitive is absolutely out of use. So we have nowadays *Dirò, aggiu a diri*, and *aggiu mu dicu* on the Continent, but only *Anzu eu dicu* in Corfu.

The Apulian ending *ddhu*, of the diminutive form, gave way to the Italian-looking *llu*, and is only kept and idiomatically pronounced in a few words, as *scazzamurieddhu* (funny little fellow), *javaneddhu* (from יָוֵן), *bekozzerjameddhu* (from בְּקוֹצֵר יָמִים); also in *caruddhu* (horse), *capiddhi* (hair), *chiddhu* (that), although we have *indu* from *ille*.

This dialect has brought all imported words under its own laws of accidence, including the terms streaming into it through the new emancipated life of the recent years; but its original vocabulary was hopelessly impoverished and deprived of its finest elements. A Corfiote Jew would find it a hard task to understand the spoken vernacular or the songs of the natives in any place of Apulia, although the structure of the phrases would not sound strange to his ear.

But going some centuries back (to the thirteenth), the Jews can boast of having preserved the oldest text in this dialect, as exhibited in Or. 6276 of the British Museum. Wealth of obsolete terms standing as near as possible to the Latin, and fulness of grammatical forms are the characteristics of the few Apulian pages contained in this very thin 4°. They are translations of Hebrew dirges, and one comes across such words and expressions as *tamen sollicitateri* (mind), *etiam Ribbi Ismahel, lu coriu* (skin) *di lu carnì sua*, and *la ostia* (army) *di li cieli*. In the following centuries the ignorance of primitive Apulian had so far advanced in Corfu that readers were no longer able to pronounce correctly the words of this Hebrew MS. or to grasp their meanings. In order to meet the difficulty a first step was taken by adding the vowel-points, which was done very inaccurately; and later on a too self-confident scribe, prompted by the conviction that he had to do with mistakes, took the liberty of correcting them and substituted *duzzini* (dozens) for *donzelli* (young men), *macchina* (machine) for *magina* (image), and

did his best to scratch off the obnoxious superlative termination of *grandissima*. We owe it perhaps to the influence of the Venetian that he has spared all the single-worded futures, but four or five erasures of the pronoun of the first person were so fully covered by the newly introduced characters that we have been deprived of the benefit to learn through this MS. what was the old form of the peculiar *jonì* which now is used side by side with *jò*.

An adequate idea of the plurality of languages which has prevailed in the Corfu Jewry during the last seven centuries is supplied, I believe, by the various changes of Biblical proper names, of which here are some examples:

אַבְרָהָם, Abram, Abram-άκι, Bambi, Bamboli, Abramino, Nino.

שְׁלֹמֹה, Selomò, Σελωμάκι, Μάκι, Salamon, Solomon.

שָׂרָה, Sarà, Sarina, Σάρη, Σάρω, Σαρούλα, Σαρτινιό, Sandra.

רִיכֶטָה, Rifqà, Ρέκω, Richetta, Enrichetta, Ρέγκω, Ρέγκουλα.

שְׁמוּחָה, Μίχω, Μιχώνη, Mihhetta, Συμιχούλα, Allegra, Allegrina, Εύθυμία.

Στάμω (Stametta, Stamettina, Metti, Mattilde), Χάιδω, Κόκω (from Byzantine Εὐδοκία), and Ζαφείρω came from the Greek mainland.

To-day the Jews speak Venetian, Apulian, Italian, and Greek again in Corfu; Greek in Arta, Zante, Chalcis, Crete, and Volo; Spanish and Greek in Athens; and Spanish in Larissa and Trikala. In all these places they attend classes in Greek schools of all degrees.

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